

## Governor chides feds' bison approach

Gov. Brian Schweitzer wrote the departments of Agriculture and Interior to tell them they are working at cross-purposes when it comes to bison and brucellosis.

By SCOTT McMILLION Chronicle Staff Writer

The federal government needs to start getting along with itself if there is to be any improvement in the long-term management of Yellowstone National Park bison, Gov. Brian Schweitzer has said in a letter.

And Sen. Conrad Burns, R-Mont., should get on board as well, Schweitzer wrote Monday to the secretaries of the federal departments of Interior and Agriculture.

Burns recently attached a "rider" to a critical spending bill that could, if it becomes law, block one of Schweitzer's bison-management proposals.

Interior and Agriculture have "inherent conflicts" in their approach to bison, Schweitzer wrote.

The National Park Service, part of the Interior Department, runs the park and hasn't culled its bison herd since the 1960s.

The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service manages livestock diseases and therefore oversees brucellosis programs affecting Montana. It is part of the Agriculture Department.

The Park Service "insists on minimal management of bison in the park," Schweitzer wrote, while APHIS rules say that if two cattle herds anywhere in the state test positive for brucellosis, the entire state loses its brucellosis-free status, a valuable item in exporting cattle.

That policy applies "even though the risk of transmission affects only a very small geographic area" close to the park, he wrote.

The letter says, in effect, that one branch of the federal government won't control diseased bison while another branch threatens to sanction all Montana ranchers if those bison infect just two Montana cattle herds.

APHIS spokespersons could not be reached for comment Wednesday, and Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne had not seen the letter and was traveling Wednesday, a spokeswoman said.

Yellowstone spokesman Al Nash said he hasn't seen a lack of cooperation among state and federal agencies on the ground.

"I don't see any question as to whether or not we're working together on this issue, because we are," Nash said Wednesday. "We interact very thoughtfully and cordially."

Schweitzer has been promoting what he describes as "two fundamental possibilities" for bison management.

One is a limited quarantine that calls for increased testing of any cattle in the bison "mixing zone" around the park. Detection of brucellosis there would not threaten the status of the entire state, but creation of the smaller quarantine area would take APHIS approval.

The second idea calls for purchasing the grazing rights on private land in the mixing zone and removing cattle.

Either option would involve greater numbers of hunters in an effort to control bison population.

The idea of moving cattle to make room for bison has been panned by some major livestock groups in the state, and Burns is backing up that position.

He has inserted a rider into an Interior Appropriations bill that says "attempts to shift the focus towards disease management, rather than eradication, or to create buffer zones around the park, should be rejected by the (Interior) department."

The rider also calls for all parties to work together to sign a memorandum of agreement that has been floating around for months. That memo, which remains unsigned, calls for an increased focus on brucellosis eradication, which would mean a lot of dead bison, since the disease is incurable.

"To simply expand the buffer zone and move the cattle solves nothing except to push ranchers off the land and continually expand the buffer zone," Burns said in a prepared statement. "We must find a long-term solution addressing the health of the Yellowstone bison herd."

Schweitzer urged the federal agencies to "work to resolve inherent problems" and then work with the states.

The way things are now, Montana has to deal with the bison and often gets a "black eye" when doing so, he wrote.

"Hope for mild winters seems to be the only long-range federal plan," he wrote, while ranchers pray that the plan will work. "But hopes and prayers do not constitute a plan."

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